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A SIENESE PAINTING

MR. J. PIERPONT MORGAN has given to the Museum the monumental altarpiece, *The Assumption of the Virgin* by Benvenuto di Giovanni, which was formerly in the Church of the Convent in Grancia (Maremma Toscana), Province of Grosseto.

It is unnecessary to point out the extreme importance of this painting to our collection, not only because of the intrinsic excellence of the work, but also because of the scarcity of early Italian paintings in America and the difficulty of procuring pictures of this character and size.

Benvenuto and his son Girolamo, who worked with him during the latter part of his life, were the last of the Sienese artists who remained loyal to the ancient artistic traditions of their city. For two centuries the Sienese painters confined their energies to the expression of an ideal which was purely decorative and poetic. They were untroubled by the pursuit of solidity of structure or anatomical correctness or by the scientific curiosity which actuated the neighboring artists of Florence. In all the turmoil of the foreign and civil wars and amid the jealousies and fierce hatreds which made Siena one of the most turbulent of Italian towns during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, her artists occupied themselves in embodying placid dreams, wherein, against backgrounds of patterned gold or serene landscape, pose stately people untouched by human passions, whose every gesture seems borrowed from some sacred ceremonial. They kept to flat colors, as a rule, and to a conventional line, which sometimes approaches caligraphy, as in certain Oriental arts; and, within the limits of their concentrated aim toward pure loveliness, they achieved a greater success than had been attained by many more vigorous schools.

Benvenuto di Giovanni (1436-1518) was a pupil of Vecchietta, and a representative Sienese artist of his day, as were Francesco di Giorgio and Neroccio di Landi, his fellow pupils. Francesco was somewhat

influenced by the Florentines, but Benvenuto's painting would indicate no acquaintance with the work of his unresting and eager Florentine contemporaries. He retains the brilliant color, the hard finish, and the technical methods of the older generation tempered only by an additional effort after sweetness and softer sentiment. His output is variable in quality, but his best paintings are splendid in pattern and color. In his larger pictures he was capable of a sustained enthusiasm which was rarely equaled by his fellow-workers.

The Assumption of the Virgin was one of the favorite themes of Sienese art. In conservative schools a certain rendering of a subject is accepted as orthodox and the general arrangement can be only slightly varied. This is particularly the case with religious pictures, and in fact with all subjects that touch profoundly popular beliefs. This copying of the skeleton of a picture was not plagiarism, however, as the details were freely treated, enabling the artist to stamp his work distinctly with his own personality and, within the prescribed boundaries, to give free play to his own expression.

The parent type of these Assumptions seems to be the work of Pietro Lorenzetti. The conception was further crystallized by Vecchietta in the triptych at Pienza.

Vecchietta's picture, like our altarpiece, shows the Virgin seated with hands folded, surrounded by cherubs and accompanied by floating angels, playing on musical instruments or singing. Above is the foreshortened figure of Christ, with prophets, and below kneels St. Thomas receiving the girdle. This general treatment occurs again and again, as it was followed by practically all of the fifteenth-century Sienese artists [A similar arrangement occurs in the picture by Andrea di Bartolo sold here last winter at the Yerkes Sale.]

In the Museum's picture the pattern is fuller than in other renderings. In addition to the host of attending angels and prophets, there is a wide landscape where St. Thomas, St. Francis, and St. Anthony of Padua kneel near the sarcophagus filled with growing flowers.

The exact balance of masses gives this

intricate composition its effect of serenity. Its richness comes from the variations in the treatment of the balancing forms and also from the skillful use of simple colors. The arrangement of recurring reds in the cool grays and blues which make up the general tone follows perfectly the logic of the linear design. The altarpiece is ornament primarily, but in addition to its sensuous charm, which is capable of analysis, is another which cannot be defined, the

charm of the beautiful legend which it fittingly realizes.

There are several works by Benvenuto in America. Among these are the large altarpiece, *Madonna and Saints*, in the Fogg Museum at Cambridge, and, in the Jarves Collection at New Haven, a picture of the *Madonna and Saints*. A very charming little panel of *Love Bound by the Maidens*, by him or his son, is also in the New Haven Collection.

B. B.

